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Covid-19 and the Pandemics: A Critical Study in the Select Plague Narratives and the Chronicles of Death Foretold

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Abstract:

Throughout history, humanity has been marked by a succession of disasters and upheavals. Calamities, whether of human origin or natural, have consistently coexisted throughout human history. Science and technology have reached their pinnacle, and medical advancements have significantly enhanced both life-saving measures and overall health conditions in the 20th and 21st centuries. However, plagues and pandemics have persisted consistently, carving their presence despite these advancements. Going through the history of pandemics from early 20th century till now one can witness that there has been occurred more than one dozen epidemics have affected the worldwide population. Covid-19 is the latest outbreak which cloaked the whole globe in the middle of 2020. Corona crisis has crippled the human life and put everything out of gear. The pandemic-induced fear and isolation have presented a valuable chance for individuals to explore classic literature and understand how authors and artists across various eras have depicted epidemics in their respective stories, offering insights into historical perceptions of such crises. Scholars and researchers in literature have recognized the intimate connection between pandemics and the annals of world literature.

The present paper will go in detail how plague literature and pestilence writing portrayed the human condition during different periods of history, and how the readers get to know about death and disaster has severely affected the man physically, mentally, socially and politically. The paper aims to extensively explore characters and analyze settings that are directly or indirectly linked to pandemics. Additionally, it will investigate the ongoing

relationship between the current COVID crisis and past plagues. It will also demonstrate how the pestilences over time have affected the artists and literary writing.

Keywords: Pandemic, Plague Narratives, Covid-19, Existential Dilemma, Apocalyptic Fiction.

Michel Foucault, the French philosopher and critic, in one of his ground-breaking books entitled *Discipline and Punish* describes the precautionary measures which one has to take during time of pandemic. The book is the detailed discourse on discipline and imprisonment and Foucault examines the situations and conditions during the plague. The writer talks about the pandemic which hit during the 17th century and talks about the precautionary measures like "...partitioning off spaces in a rigorous manner" (*Discipline and Punish* 131) which has become social distance in Covid-19, "the entire house is closed while the perfume is consumed" (*Discipline and Punish* 181), the practice of quarantine, "a cleanliness inspection every day, an inspection of clothing every week" (*Discipline and Punish* 272) wearing masks and constant check-ups.

Foucault's text demonstrates how literary studies have the interrelation with the pandemics. The plague narratives throughout the human history have revealed how natural disasters severely affected the human as well as non-human world. The pandemic literature is filled with cataclysmic narratives which tells how the different pandemics have been dealt and experienced by the different people differently. Historical and literary references indicate that past pandemics had varying impacts on human lives compared to the effects we see today. In the literary timeline, examples like the bubonic plague, which ravaged Europe in the 14th century, coincide with the writings of Chaucer and Boccaccio, who addressed the social and political challenges of their era.

We come to know how Black Death became one of the reasons for Giovanni Boccaccio's pioneering text *The Decameron* which narrates the beautiful and mind captivating stories when a small Brigata assembles "into the notable city of Florence, fair over every other of Italy" where everyone has gobsmacked because "there came the death-dealing pestilence" and a Brigata lock themselves up in a place and find the atmosphere very peaceful and serene (*Boccaccio* 2). In times of distress, these characters find solace by sharing engaging and entertaining stories. The quarantine story tellers through their stories reveal socio-political and religious conditions of the age. The reader also learns about their unconscious self and their behaviour towards pandemic and society. The text demonstrates the interrelationship between natural disaster and social reality. The narrative "allows a

continual dialogue between the characters about what has changed, or is changing, due to many varying circumstances, but primarily plague” (Ricket 15). The author uses quarantined characters to unveil instances of social and political hypocrisy. In his research article, Rachel D. Rickel observes:

Pampinea further describes the immoral state of the church as exposed during the plague by stating, “those enclosed in monasteries, who, having convinced themselves that such behaviour is suitable for them and is only unbecoming of others, have broken the rules of obedience and given themselves to carnal pleasures, thereby thinking to escape, and have turned lascivious and dissolute. (Rickel 29)

The pandemic became one of the major themes through which Boccaccio establishes many discourses through the different stories. The Covid-19 reminds the readers about Black Death and its disastrous impact on human lives in the 14th century Europe. Ben Hecko in his dissertations observes:

As Covid-19 has shown, pandemics result in major changes to several elements of society. One of the most obvious examples of this widespread change from a pandemic is the Black Death. As Historian David Heartily notes, “the Black Death, broke the Malthusian deadlock. And in doing so it gave to European the chance to rebuild their society along much different lines. (Hecko, 01)

COVID-19 evokes parallels with the dreadful circumstances of the Black Death and how people responded to the plague during that time. Covid-19 echoes with Black Death and other natural calamities which badly hit the human world. While not the initial plague addressed, the Black Death stands out as the first plague depicted by literary artists, offering a portrayal that aids in comprehending the grim realities of COVID-19. Flipping out the pages of *The Decameron*, one must understand Covid-19 resonates the Black Death and vice-versa. As Black Death brought a enormous catastrophe to the whole Europe, Covid-19 too sternly affected human life.

The calamity brought upon humanity by people's self-isolation and constant movement between locations undoubtedly occurred. However, authors and scholars in literature have garnered substantial insight from these catastrophic events. From the earlier pandemics to the Black Death, and from the Black Death to the Covid-19, these pandemics have viciously affected social values. The artistic objects and the painting after Black Death witnessed a great change.

Before Boccaccio's masterpiece, it was Homer, the Greek poet who in his magnum opus *The Illiad* gives some references of the plague that visits to the Greeks. One of the American academicians Danniel Blickman observes that the conflictual episode between Achilles and Agamamnon "should not blind us to the role of the plague in setting the tone for what follows, nor, more importantly, in proving an ethical pattern which lies near the heart of the story" (*The Conversation*). The plague, in other words, presents a picture which results the ill-management and the off-track behaviour of some characters involved in the conflict.

Instead of Homer, Thucydides, the Greek historian who survived from the great plague which hit the Greek city states during the Peloponnesian war, gave the readers the better picture of the war and the pestilence. The historian remains positive when thousands of people died and fled from the country. Thucydides uses the Hippocratic medicine and read philosophy which was mainly associated with moral scepticism. Homer's works not only reflect the catastrophic events of the war between Spartans and Greeks but also mentions how the military fled when plague struck the country. Kaylee Tillet in his article *Plague as Divine Punishment in Homer's Iliad I* writes:

Agamemnon and the Greeks had done to make Apollo so angry. Achilles also instructed them to start giving up offerings for Apollo. This is where the source ends. Further reading of the *Iliad* shows that the plague is eventually resolved after a soothsayer tells Achilles the reason for the disease, and Agamemnon eventually returns the priest's daughter.

Reading Thucydides and Homer side by side, one could understand that the plague narratives instruct and delight the readers how the people tackled the situation and what was their response towards the disastrous effect of human lives. Under Covid-19 pandemic, one can find himself in the same paranoia, depression and isolation as Greeks found themselves when Homer and Thucydides used to write. Like Black Death, the Covid-19 gave the ample opportunity to the readers and researchers to unfold the history and the literary narratives that what was the attitude and perception of people towards the disasters.

Coming down to the 17th century then one can get a fine picture of plague from Daniel Defoe's *The Journal of a Plague Year* (1722). The book is a non-fictional account which gives the full account of the pandemic that hit the Great Britain in 1722. The book describes the events and episodes which chill down the spine of a common reader when he encounters with daily deaths and the misfortunes which befell on the human-world. The journal begins with the rumours that the great plague will hit out and devastate the whole

Europe again. These rumours soon tuned into facts when it really covers the whole continent under its grip. The author begins the events from the September 1664:

It was about the beginning of September, 1664, that I, among the rest of my neighbours, heard, in ordinary discourse, that the plague was returned again in Holland; for it had been very violent there, and particularly at Amsterdam and Rotterdam, in the year 1663, whither they say, it was brought, some said from Italy, others from the Levant,' among some goods which were brought home by their ^ Turkey fleet ; others said it was brought from Candia ; * others from Cyprus. It mattered not from whence it came; but all agreed it was come into Holland again. (Defoe, 03)

The journal has a historical as well as a literary significance. The way it gives the panoramic picture of the plague and its spread to the other parts of London makes the reader believe that it is the firsthand experience of the author which he himself witnessed. It also describes the human perception and his/her attitude towards the conditions and the disaster which befell on people. Defoe mentions a character in this book namely Solomon Eagle “who took to parading about the streets off the Fleet, denouncing the sins of the city “sometimes quite naked, and with a Pan of burning Charcoal on his Head”” (The Guardian). The book comes under the genre of fiction ‘historical fiction’ which echoes Covid-19 situation in its narrative. The streets of London are empty and devastating and the smell of human sufferings could be felt everywhere.

In his short story “The Masque of Red Death” (1842), Edgar Allan Poe allegorizes the death through the character of Prince Prospero who gets into trap of through the pestilence. Prospero, a very popular prince escapes from the city with other nobles to save himself from the Red Death. Poe believes that the Red Death is the most devastating disease and “No pestilence had ever so fatal, or so hideous” (Poe 3). These diseases are being personified by the author which wreaths havoc and creates utmost fear among the masses. The author exhibits the power and control of pestilence and the helpless and hapless situation of a human being who puts his utmost effort to prevent himself and other nobles. He builds a structure like castellated abbeys. The prince believes that the pandemic will not be able to overpower him. The narrator says:

This was an extensive and magnificent structure, the creation of the prince’s own eccentric yet august taste. A strong and lofty wall girdled it in. This wall had gates of iron. The courtiers, having entered, brought furnaces and massy hammers and welded the bolts. They resolved to leave means neither of

ingress nor egress to the sudden impulses of despair or of frenzy from within.
The abbey was amply provisioned. With such precautions the courtiers might
bid defiance to contagion. (Poe 3)

The story like the other narratives also echoes with the present Covid crisis when like Prince, the scientists have initially failed to save the lives of millions of people. Prince is being used as a metaphorical figure who like a common man does the herculean task to evade from the Red Death but fails to get release from his clutches. The author confronts the nature and man, and attempts to prove how man is nothing but a cat's paw of fate. The story has autobiographical elements as Poe himself has experienced the pestilence when his wife Virginia and his mother Eliza died.

In the 20th century, one of the remarkable pandemic narratives is Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1947). The setting of the novel is a French city Oran which is being fictionalized by the author and is hit by the plague. The narrative takes the fictional account of a bubonic plague which spread in 19th century in France but the author portrays the situation of 1940s and 1950s. The narrative is in a "sparse, haunting prose – takes us through a catastrophic outbreak of a contagious disease in the highly fictionalised town of Oran on the Algerian coast, as seen through the eyes of the novel's hero, a Doctor Rieux, a version of Camus himself" (*The School*). Reading between the lines, one can explore that Camus has used the plague as a metaphor which is the cause of the existential dilemma in the modern times and the pandemic becomes a prison for the masses in Oran and curbs their movement. The author questions that though the plague has restricted the freedom of the people but before plague, as the author questions whether they were free in actuality or was it an illusion. The novel resonates Covid-19 crisis because the people of Oran initially overlook the disease and considers it a least suffering when compared to their own misery. But when the plague spreads at a very breakneck speed, then after they start to fight against it. Before the plague people lived their life in a meaningless way but according to Camus they struggle to find out the meaning when they revolt against pandemic. The plague transforms the lives of people in unprecedented ways. As Covid-19 paralysed the life of human world across the globe and "there have been reports of increased mental health challenges, growth in domestic abuse, concerns over the rationing of the health and social care, and the long-term risks attached to prolonged social isolation-especially among the elderly and those at the high risk" (Pentaris17).

Apocalyptic Fiction and Pandemic

The apocalyptic narratives deal with the end of the times and demonstrate the different causes of destruction and devastation. They give the different reasons which could lead the world to its brink and finally bring the final end. The apocalyptic writing which deals with the pandemics and disease reasoned that the cause of the end of the times would be the plague which could devastate whole human world. One of the major apocalyptic fictions that deal with the plague is *The Last Man* (1826) by Marry Shelley. The novel is a dystopian fiction which is set between the year 2073 to 2100. The narrator is the last man who is the lone survivor of whole human race and he narrates the devastating tale to the readers. The novel is a tale of “the one who is superfluous in a world without men. It is the story of one who remains. Now, what does this reminder of humanity signify in relation to the question of the ends of the man?” (Barbara 8). Shelley does not mention any technological warfare or technological apocalypse but a natural disaster which left the world empty and in utter chaos. Reading this novel becomes the real experience for the present-day readers as it defamiliarizes them. What was considered as imaginary during pre-Covid times have become now reality. The narrative proves itself as to some extent realistic tale when we see a devastating world inside the story and experience the Covid misery outside the plot. The fictional apocalypse turned to be real when the whole world hit by the unexpected pandemic and reminded us *The Last Man* whose “universality is nightmarish version of the desire to establish a universal discourse, to spread equality and fraternity throughout the world.” (Barbara 11). Camus suggests that “the universal empire of the plague would not be only... what is excluded from Western Humanism” but “would also be its *inverted image*” (Barbara 11).

One of the ground-breaking texts of apocalyptic pandemic fiction is Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912), a post-apocalyptic narrative which is set in 2073. Like *The Last Man*, the novel demonstrates the theme of death of the whole human race and the survival of the few. The author in the beginning of the novel shows that there is alarmed situation but people turn a blind eye because they believe that “the bacteriologists would find a way to overcome this new germ, just as they had overcome other germs in the past” (London, 27). Like the Covid-19 situation, the author portrayed the masses as blind believers of science and technology and they averted the critical situation. But when the plague and death toll rise, the people get frightened and started to shut themselves up in the houses and closed walls. The narrator says:

But the trouble was the astonishing quickness with which this germ destroyed human beings, and the fact that it inevitably killed any human body it entered. No one ever recovered. There was the old Asiatic cholera, when you might eat dinner with a well man in the evening, and the next morning, if you got up early enough, you would see him being hauled by your window in the death-cart. But this new plague was quicker than that—much quicker. (London, 27)

London shows how plague and virus defeated science and how the trust of the people in science got shattered when they experience the rising of the deaths at a very fast speed. The narratives proved a right prediction after the outbreak of Spanish Flue in 1918 which has claimed millions of lives across the globe. The novel is also being looked through Covid-19 pandemic and Covid-19 situation gets reflected through the London's novel.

In addition to London's text, there are other works, movies and serials which display the pandemic picture in their dystopian settings like *The Stand* (1978) by Stephan King, *Fever* (1916) by Deon Meyer, *Contagion*. film by Steven Soderbergh etc. These different literary and media narratives not only presents the picture of the human catastrophe but also reveals the attitudes and perception of the masses and the rulers of those times. These fictional accounts acquainted us with new language and new ideology which these pandemics create among the people. Covid-19 crisis caused the upheaval and become a reminder of such fictional and sometimes non-fictional accounts.

Perception and the Conflict during Pandemics

Throughout the course of history, one can witness how the people play by ear with the plague. Not only this, but the plague like Covid-19 has created the socio-political and religious conflict among different communities. During the time Marcus Aurilius, the Roman emperor, the small pox which hit at that time the Roman Empire was later blamed to the Christian community and they were made culpable for its affliction. In Europe, Jews were blamed for spreading disease among the Christians by accusing them by throwing the poison to the wells and other water bodies. In recent times, in 2020, a small Muslim community in Delhi (India) became the scapegoat for spreading the covid-19. Stuart Sim observes:

Conspiracy theories were rife throughout the pandemic and vaccination, when it came on the scene in 2021, became one of their main targets: a conflict which is not yet over and which signals some critical fault-lines in our culture. Uncritical belief, too, is rife in our culture and it does not need much to kick it

into gear (uncritical belief in conspiracy theories is practically a given).
(Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year and Covid-19*, 50)

One can also see how the US president called Covid-19 as Chinese Virus; while China rebuffed this blame and rebutted it with that US is responsible for bringing AIDS to the world. Such type of blame game is not a novice but can be seen throughout the course of the history. This racist, religious and political bias has been debated by Daniel Defoe in his *Journal of the Plague Year*.

Though a natural disaster, the pandemic throughout the narratives has been seen and perceived differently by different people. The Biblical interpretation of the plague is that it is a punishment from God to the people because of their sins. This biblical interpretation of the Plague, however has been turned down by Thucydides, the Greek historian and Lucretius, the Roman Poet in their writings. Jack London in another novel *The Unparalleled Invasion* (1910) regards plague as biological warfare. He also makes responsible to the capitalists and the unchecked population growth for germinating the virus. Mary Shelley in her novel *The Last Man* denounces that the plague has anything with good or evil. Plague by most of the people and scientists, is generally being seen as a natural disaster like flood, famine, draught, earthquake etc. and Covid-19 is not a novice pandemic but has relation with the past pestilences and viruses.

Conclusion

Covid-19 has appeared in the human world not the first time but since the ages with different shapes and with different names. The writers and the literary scholars have depicted the cataclysmic condition of the different plagues differently. From Homer to Jack London, the plague narratives give the panoramic picture of the people and the disastrous impact of pandemics. The reader on the one hand feels a relief after reading the fascinating apocalyptic tales and on the other had it also chills down the spine that what destruction plagues has brought to the human-world. These narratives not only fictionalize the real situation of the pandemic but also instruct and delight the readers.

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